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**Indigenous Authority and State  
Policy: Popular participation in  
two villages in rural Bolivia**

**Vibeke Andersson**

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# **Indigenous Authority and State Policy:\***

## **Popular participation in two villages in rural Bolivia**

Vibeke Andersson\*\*

*In recent years Bolivia has been going through substantial economic and social transformations. Due to changes in the world economy, the tin prices, which Bolivia relied on as main income, have fallen significantly. This has led to a situation, where the World Bank and the IMF entered and in cooperation with the Bolivian government passed a structural adjustment program in 1985. The economic situation improved as an effect of the program but the social situation got worse. The poverty of the majority of the Bolivian population has increased in this period.*

*This situation is part of the background for the new political and administrative reforms by the Bolivian State. This article discusses one of these new reforms, namely the reform of Participación Popular, the popular participation reform, which is analyzed on the basis of the author's fieldwork in a municipality in the southern part of the Potosí department, Bolivia.*

### **Introduction**

The material for this working paper was gathered during my fieldwork in a municipality located in the Potosí Department in the southern part of Bolivia. The emphasis in presenting the findings here lies in letting some of the people of the villages in the municipality speak. Therefore quotations are used as explaining views of the village people on the reforms, which the Bolivian State has been implementing in rural areas since 1995. The fieldwork took place in 1999 and 2000. Special emphasis will be put on the reform of "Participación Popular" (popular participation), which is a municipal reform, which decentralizes funds and decisions to the municipal councils. This decentralization is a profound transformation in Bolivian society, which until 1995 was very centralised when it comes to power and spending of funds. The people living in the rural areas of Bolivia have not been used to anything good coming from the central government. Either the rural areas have been neglected, or new laws have been passed, that in some form reduced the land available for the rural population. The popular participation reform has for the first time introduced possibilities for change in the rural areas supported by the State and supposedly intended to take the rural population's demands into consideration. Popular participation is a tool to introducing methods of "good governance" on the local level. Good governance has been important to introduce to third world

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\* This paper is based on two year field research in Bolivia.

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countries within recent years. This has to be seen in relation to the democratization processes, which is introduced in many countries by foreign donors and governments in cooperation (Leftwich 1993). In these democratization processes it is an inherent assumption, that democracy is “good” and can be applied everywhere, regardless of culture, traditions and history in third world countries around the world. The implementation of democratization is incorporating elements appropriate to the specific countries. In Bolivia, the indigenous population requires special themes to be dealt with, since their traditions are important for social organization in the rural areas, and since the indigenous population is a majority in the country.

The Bolivian mine export sector has for a long period of time been able to support the oligarchal state, leaving other areas and parts of the population outside the core of the state. This has changed with declining exports and collapse of the state’s economy. Foreign donors and national governments have sowed the need for change within the Bolivian state. And they have seen the need for incorporating rural areas and their population into the state, to thereby create economic and social growth for the country. This implies making the rural indigenous population “interested” in supporting the state. To create this interest, the State has had to give something in return. In this case possibility of political influence at the municipal level and decentralization of State funds to the municipalities. This paper tries to show the interest “from below” towards the popular participation reform and the inherent acknowledging of a marginalized group of people: The indigenous people of Bolivia’s rural areas.

### **State and Parties**

In Bolivia, as in many other third world countries, political parties have played a crucial role in power structures of the state. In this context political parties are renowned for their paternalistic structure with wide spread use of patron-client relations at all levels of society.

In 1952 Bolivia experienced a revolution. The revolution was led by MNR (Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario - the national revolutionary movement) which later transformed into a party. This party has been governing the country for various periods since 1952. One of the primary goals of the MNR after gaining power in 1952 was to nationalize the major mines and industries of Bolivia. Until then the Bolivian society was characterized by ultraliberal rule with the Criollo<sup>1</sup> minority as the ruling class possessing all assets of society. The government and legislation favored the Criollo population and the rural areas were “forgotten” unless people living there were needed as working force on the haciendas or in the mines. In the hacienda-areas the “pongo” (rural laborer) by the ruling classes was regarded as little less than a slave of the hacienda-owner.

The MNR started as a revolutionary movement in the 1940's consisting of city intellectuals and peasant leaders of the Cochabamba valleys. When in power after the revolution the MNR - apart from the nationalization of the mines - passed an agrarian reform, that made the former pongos owners of a small plot of land. Some of the former hacienda-areas (but not all, (Anteza 1992)) transformed into plots of freehold farms.

The nationalization of the mines converted the state into the owner of the major sources of income of the country. One of the primary effects was that the political parties became a source of wealth for the people connected to the parties. This way of doing politics is rooted in the political system, which the new republics of Latin America "inherited" from the Spaniards during more than 300 years of colonization. The new republics maintained an administration apparatus that was built by the colonial state. In the colonial state the administration represented a source of wealth in the sense that the state was "owned" by the ruling class of people drawn overwhelmingly from the most educated and articulate sections of the population, and associated in most cases with those groups within society which already enjoyed the greatest social status, wealth and power (Spaniards and Criollos) (Clapham 1985). This constitutes a form of governing, that could be described as "neo-patrimonialism", which signifies that officials hold positions in bureaucratic and political organizations with power which is formally defined, but exercise this power in a form of private property to state administration. This also constitutes a fair amount of corruption and clientilism inside the political system (Clapham 1985; Christoffanini 1989). Originating from the patrimonial governance of the Spanish King, where political administration was a personal matter for the King, the democratic tradition in Latin America has developed differently than in Europe, where "the fathers of liberalism" (Montesquieu, Locke and Roussau) were concerned (theoretically) with securing the rights of the individual towards the state after years of absolutist royal rule in Europe. Latin American leaders, on the other hand, have been concerned with the state controlling the individuals (Christoffanini 1989). In Bolivia this can be seen in the many years of oligarchic rule (1825-1952) and in the constitution of the "state of 1952"<sup>2</sup> (Laserna 1997), where the ruling political party formed the state and possessed all the nation's assets.

As a particular expression of this, the ruling political party in power in Bolivia has had an almost absolute monopoly to secure jobs and positions for its followers. The party "owned" the state and individuals connected to the ruling party were secured jobs and advantages for as long as the party was in government. This means that party politics in Bolivia is much more than politics: It's a way of securing the wealth of members of political parties.

## **Participación Popular**

The reform: Participación Popular”, is seen by some as a “modernization” of the Bolivian State (PROADE/ILDIS 1994; Ministerio de Desarrollo Humano 1997). The main objective of the reform is to break down former systems patrimonialism and speed up the decentralization and democratization of the Bolivian society. The reform Participación Popular is by Bolivian academics and foreign donors regarded as a big leap forward in changing the Bolivian society at all levels (political, economical, cultural), and the donors are following the process closely.

Participación Popular is a law on municipalities. It divides rural areas into new municipalities with elected municipal councils and it redirects tax money from the central administration to the new municipalities. Every municipality receives funds that match the number of inhabitants of the municipality. But apart from this more “technical” decentralization of funds and political influence, the Participación Popular also recognizes that the rural areas have had their own way of organizing in the villages (“comunidades”), which often originates from the Prehispanic period.

When the Spaniards arrived to what today is Bolivia, the population in the Andean region was a part of the Inca empire. When conquering new areas, the Incas installed their own administration, but generally did not interfere with the population’s organization of daily life or way of organizing production. In what is now the Bolivian highland region (and in the highland regions of other Andean countries) the population was organized in *ayllus*, which were kinship groups linked together by real or inhibited kinship and with collectively owned land in different ecological zones. This secured different products inside each ayllu, which this way became self-sufficient. The ayllu’s social organization was based on “cargo’s” (duties) which were rotating, and normally a person possessed a cargo for a year, beginning with the most insignificant (today: comisario, meaning common member) and ending with the cargo of the “kuraka” (or jilaqu); the traditional leader of the ayllu<sup>3</sup>. It was regarded as a duty of the male members of the ayllu to fulfill the different cargo’s.

When the Spaniards came to the area, many ayllus were split up and the people were relocated in villages, located near the haciendas to secure the hacienda owners a labor force<sup>4</sup>. In spite of the breaking up of the ayllus, the way of organizing leadership has persisted - also in the new villages created by the Spaniards (Albó 1990).

The authorities of the rural villages were thus the kurakas and another “new” authority, the *corregidor*. The *corregidor* was an administrative post in rural areas installed by the Spaniards<sup>5</sup>, and until 1952 he was collecting taxes.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1960's the labor union started organizing the rural areas, and during the Banzer and Garcia Meza dictatorships in the 70's and beginning of the 80's, the peasant labor union, was a major political force in the rural areas. In most villages people formed unions linked to the national peasant union, CSUTCB (Central Sindical de los Trabajadores Campesinos Bolivianos - Association of peasants in Bolivia).

The way of organizing the rural communities, have been built into the reform of Participación Popular. Local organizations – unions or original organizations as ayllus can register as OTB's (Organización Territorial de Base - territorial basis organizations). The OTB represents the people of a territory. This can be the territory of an ayllu or the territory in which the members of a union live. The members of the OTB elect one member to the Comité de Vigilancia (supervising committee), whose duty it is to participate in municipal planning and to control the budget of the municipality. In this way, the Participación Popular aims at making original organizations in the rural area part of the law. Not by incorporating them, but by acknowledging them. This is a profound change of state politics, since the rural areas have been marginalised in the Bolivian State until recently. The problem in forming the OTB's has until now been, that information about the law has not reached the rural areas in an organized matter. Therefore much doubt has existed in the municipalities as to how the OTB's were supposed to function.

### **State Politics towards the Rural Indigenous Population**

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the ruling Criollo class regarded the indigenous population of Bolivia as backward and as an obstacle against evolution/modernity (Demant 1986; Mörner 1987; Poole 1997). The culture and way of life of the indigenous population was regarded as impossible to integrate into “modern” life. As a consequence of this, the indigenous population was marginalised, oppressed and exploited in the Bolivian (urban, mine, and hacienda) society.

The revolution of 1952 was supported by the peasants - mostly from the Cochabamba area. After gaining power, the MNR passed several reforms that changed the Bolivian society profoundly: The right of voting for everyone, an educational reform, the nationalization of mines and major industries and an agrarian reform where haciendas were split up and former pongos received land. The derogatory word “indio” which categorized the Bolivian indigenous population before 1952 was by MNR changed to “campesino” to indicate, that



the Bolivian society was changing towards an (attempted) mono cultural society. This was seen in opposition to a society characterized by diversified cultures divided in (urban) criollo and mestizo cultures and (rural) indigenous cultures. The political project of the MNR in the post revolutionary period was the creation of a Bolivian “nation”<sup>7</sup>.

The creation of the Bolivian nation<sup>8</sup> failed for different reasons in the years following the revolution. One of the main factors was the fact that the Bolivian State did not “need” the rural population as citizens and taxpayers, since the state was secured income from the nationalized mines and industries. The rural (indigenous) population was marginalised after the agrarian reform. No laws were passed which could have helped improve production and infrastructure in the Bolivian rural areas (Antezana 1992)<sup>9</sup>.

The economic situation of Bolivia changed during the 1980's. By 1985 Bolivia was on the edge of bankruptcy due to falling tin prices (until then Bolivia's main source of income), and new political initiatives were needed, if the state was not to collapse. The political elite recognized this and from 1985 and on, work was being prepared for the reform of Participación Popular, which was passed in parliament in 1994, when MNR was the governing political party.

The formal recognition of the indigenous population and culture in Bolivian law and society is new. One factor, which led the Bolivian government to initiate this, has been an existence of a discourse at the international level about securing human rights - in this context the rights of the indigenous population.

Internationally many discussions have taken place regarding the indigenous populations, their rights and their way of life.

The modernization discourse was for many years centered on the dichotomy “primitive” versus “modern”. The assumption was, that by way of an evolutionary process of development, the so called primitive societies with their own specific cultures would eventually become modern, in the western sense of the word (Kearney 1997). Many studies have showed, however, that this evolutionary assumption of development was mistaken. Instead of “becoming modern”, indigenous people of the third world co-opted some of the western ideas and transformed these in their own worldview. Or new forms erupted, as a “hybrid” in the interface between “modern” and “traditional” (Escobar 1995). Others describe the situation as a merging of traditionally rooted and western patterns of life, i.e. that rural communities have developed their own way of coping with “modernity” (Ströbele-Gregor 1996).

## **Indigenous Organizing Practices**

In Bolivia, the life and organizing practices of indigenous population has, as mentioned before, been regarded as backward and not part of a “modern” society by the Criollo population. But, on the other hand, one could choose to see the persistent “traditional” patterns of life among the indigenous population as a reconstruction of traditions and culture - and thus as a way of adapting to new socio-economic surroundings. For example: the existence of a kuraka in the comunidades of the rural areas of Potosí is not necessarily a “relict” of former social organization, but on contrary a sign of recontextualizing organizing practices and reinvention of traditions (Hobsbawm 1983). The role of the kuraka in the comunidades of today is very different from the role of the kuraka in the times of the Incas and the Spaniards. In the time of the Spanish Colony the kuraka was an official related to the Spanish administrators. His main task was to collect taxes and organize the *mita*, which was a praxis of sending the male population of the comunidad/ayllu to work in the mines for a period of six months, securing a certain amount of persons working in the mines at all times. Also the kuraka was one of the leaders of the community. This way the Spaniards transformed the content of the kuraka’s duties and installed a local administrator at the community level. To secure the kuraka’s loyalty towards the Spaniards, the cargo<sup>10</sup> was to be inherited from father to son.

Today the kuraka is still one of the leaders of the community in some parts of the Potosí department, together with the political authority, the corregidor, but both kuraka and corregidor are cargo’s, which are to be held for one year only by all male members of the community. Each year on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, the new holders of the cargos are installed.

Once a newly wed couple has received land from their parents, they can become “afiliados” (real members) of the village. This indicates that they are a household and therefore members and must fulfill their duties. If the man for some reason cannot fulfill his duty, the wife substitutes.

*“I have not yet been authority, but I was admitted membership three years ago. I have to start with the most inferior cargos, furthermore I am too young to be corregidor or kuraka. Last year I was on the school board, now I’m just common member” (Jacinto Ramos)*

The cargo of the corregidor is an example of the local communities’ ability to change the content of an office dictated by the authorities of the state. According to the law, the corregidor today is nominated as a political representative on local level of the ruling party (parties) in government. Ideally the corregidor should be a person connected to the party in the local community. In reality the situation is often different. The community can elect a person for the cargo, no matter his political affiliation<sup>11</sup>. The person is often elected because of personal

skills, experience and charisma. The corregidor has to sort out all kinds of problems inside the community, and represent the community on departmental level.

The corregidor, kuraka and other authorities form an *assembly of authorities* every time important decisions are to be made in the community. The assembly rules using consensus for all decisions and in this way secures those decisions taken, oblige all members of the community. Ruling by way of consensus is an Andean tradition since before the Incas (Albó 1990).

In 1995 the first municipal elections were held in Bolivia. All candidates had to be elected from a party list. This means that party politics no longer only is important on the national level. The parties have now extended their power to the municipal level as well. This might seem as a paradox, since part of the reason for passing the law of Participación Popular was to avoid the centralization, corruption and clientilism of the political parties. On the other hand, it was the political parties of the Parliament, which had to pass the law. And in parliament none was interested in losing power, for example to local interest groups. So the law included the political parties protagonists of local governance.

### **The Municipality of Coma**

The municipality was formed as a result of the law of popular participation. Coma is situated in the central part of the Potosí department. The municipality is rural with a small urban center, the town of Coma, where the municipal offices are located. The municipality is inhabited by a little over 20.000 people.

The topography of the municipality is divided into two “zones”. The eastern part is situated on a plateau in about 3700 m’s. above sea level. Part of this area was until 1952 divided between various haciendas, and the inhabitants of the villages of this area were in some way or the other obliged to work for the hacienda owner.

The western part of the municipality is mountainous, and the agriculture is concentrated in the valleys, where only a small strip of land beside the rivers can be cultivated. This area consists of a number of ayllus. The town of Coma is situated in a small valley.

Most families in the rural areas of the municipality are engaged in small-scale agriculture – often so small, that the family can not survive from agriculture alone. Therefore almost every family has one or more members who migrate to low land Bolivia or Argentina to work seasonally.

## **Forms of Organization in Ayllus and Ex-hacienda Areas**

In some parts of the municipality, the ex-hacienda areas border the ayllu areas. Two villages, which are physically close, but which on the other hand are different in organization, due to their historical background, were chosen as case studies.

The two are the comunidad Huya, which belongs to an ayllu, and comunidad El Puente, which lies in an ex-hacienda area.

### *Comunidad Huya*

The village Huya is situated in the ayllu Mankasaya. Generally the members of ayllus are very proud of their past, since their ancestors fought the “patrones” (hacienda owners) and prevented their entrance on ayllu lands. Members of ayllus value their past as “free” as opposed to the population of the ex-hacienda areas.

*“These lands are original lands, a few kilometers from here there were haciendas and the owners made the laborers suffer. But our grandfathers did not permit the hacienda-owners to enter this place. Our grandfathers confronted them and forbade them enter these lands. I am proud that our ancestors fought the hacienda-owners and made them flee.” (Braulio Chuca)*

The above citation shows a discursive reconstruction of a glorious past, which is opposed to the past of the people in the hacienda-areas, who were forced to work for the “patrones”. This discourse is followed by practices, that value customs, which originate in the ayllu-structure, and which are still are used:

*“I am proud that I belong to this ayllu. Some customs are gone, but the most important ones we still practice, especially the mutual aid. I don’t think this will disappear in our work and in the distribution of water. The traditional authorities are respected by all; the kuraka and the jilakata.” (Jacinto Ramos)*

The ayllus have had a tradition of solving problems inside the ayllu without interference of the Bolivian society as such:

*“By belonging to this ayllu we feel proud. We know that we are capable, we know each other well. At the meetings we think and say things because we want to resolve our problems. This is opposed to the persons who administer the institutions (the mayor, the municipal council), most of the time they have it all in the mouth, they talk, but they don not solve problems. They are not even prepared to treat people well, they just discriminate us.” (Edgar Zuna)*

In the Andean area, the production historically has centered round the ayllu as way of organizing daily life and production. The ayllu originally had land in different ecological zones, securing different products from the different climate zones. (Murra et.al. 1986). For example: The higher areas (the puna) in 3500-4000 m's were used for pasture for the animals (Lamas). On the high plains around 3500 m's, people cultivated potatoes and quinoa (a grain indigenous to the Andean area). In the valley areas of 1500-3000 m's, the members of the ayllu grew wheat, cotton, coca and corn. In the tropical lowlands the ayllu got fruit and other tropical products. Each ayllu consisted of a group of people connected by real or inhibited kinship. As the Spaniards penetrated the Andean area, the ayllus lost their land in the different ecological zones, and mostly were left with land in one zone only, often the higher areas, which were of no use to the Spaniards. This is also true for the ayllu Mankasaya, which is situated a little above a high plain, at the foothill of a mountain range.<sup>12</sup>

The social organization and way of organizing labor for production in the ayllu has been characterized by the principle of *reciprocity*. People have worked/work mutually in three different kinds of reciprocity practices:

- a) Ayni: mutual help between few persons, often related to each other by close family ties,
- b) Minka: mutual help by a larger number of people, i.e. constructing a house for a newly wed couple and,
- c) Faena: everybody in the comunidad/ayllu is needed for larger jobs, i.e. maintaining roads or cleaning irrigation systems.

*"In the habits of working the land some customs have been lost but we still use the minka and the ayni to help each other. Some of the "evangelistas"<sup>13</sup> only work for themselves. They say that at the minka people drink a lot. But we do as we have done always because it is necessary that the family whom we work for offers chicha (alcoholic beverage) and food as a sign of appreciation."* (Edgar Zuna)

The leadership in the ayllus is formally in the hands of the corregidor and the kuraka, but with the general assemblies, all members of the ayllu can voice their opinions. The assembly of the authorities (traditional leaders of the villages) normally call for general assemblies when important decisions have to be taken.

*"The most important authority in the comunidad is the corregidor, next is the curaca. But all the political and administrative authorities (of the comunidad) always work together, all of them participate in the meetings."* (Donciano Espinoza)

### *Comunidad El Puente*

As most of agriculture in the high Andes, the fields of El Puente has to be irrigated for agricultural production. Since El Puente is situated near rivers that the mining companies use for dumping their waste, the water used for irrigation is often contaminated. This has produced serious health problems for the people in the area.

Another problem for agriculture in the ex-hacienda areas is that the plots of land are becoming too small for the families to live on. As a consequence of the agrarian reform in 1953, buying and selling land was prohibited. This was built into the law to protect the peasants against the former hacienda-owners buying their land. But it also prevented the peasants from buying land and developing farms from which they could gather a proper income. The children all inherit land, and as a consequence of this, the plots of land today are very small.

*“The land I have is herited from my father. We were five brothers and sisters and between the five we have distributed the land equally, the women receive the same amount as the men”. (Simon López)*

It is not possible for a family to live from the land alone, and migration to Argentina or other parts of Bolivia is substantial. Almost all households have a family member working away, most often the father or the eldest son. This goes for people living in the ayllus as well.

*“I didn’t buy the land I have, I received it as heritage. What we can’t produce we buy from the feria in Belén.<sup>14</sup> I leave to work some months in Yacuiba and Santa Cruz. I don’t go to Argentina because it is not easy to obtain the relevant papers. Normally I work in the rice harvest and as workman’s helper”. (Esteban Flores)*

Not only was trading land prohibited, furthermore the governments did nothing to pass reforms or laws that could encourage some form of economic and agricultural development in the rural areas. Having the incomes from the nationalized mining industry, the rural areas were of minor importance to the Bolivian governments.

Even though the creation of a hacienda destroyed original forms of organizations (ayllus) in some part of the Andean area, ways of organizing the comunidad still show traits of former types of organizations.

In comunidades in ex-hacienda areas many cargos of the ayllu have been installed again after the reorganization of the village following the agrarian reform in 1953, for example the kuraka:

*“The type of kuraka that existed at the time of the hacienda disappeared when the agrarian reform came. Then people elected the “real” kuraka as a traditional authority. He had as a symbol: the “cane of authority” (baston de manda). When the agrarian reform came I was comisario. A commission arrived and told me to tell all the laborers that the faenas and other working tasks for the patrón would be suspended.” (Leandro Salvador)*

Also the mutual work still exists (or has been reinstalled) in the ex-hacienda areas:

*“We must fulfill the obligations - the faenas and everything that the comunidad needs. I have my restaurant and I give a little more (money) than the rest. It’s okay with me, because in this way we contribute to the progress of the comunidad. I like how everything is organized. We have more order now than before.” (Gumerinda Romay)*

The obligation of fulfilling the duties of being an authority (autoridad: having a cargo) is taken very seriously by the members of the comunidad. Even though long hours are spent in meetings, forcing the authorities to neglect their work with their fields and animals, it is seen as very important serving as an authority:

*I like being an authority, even though I know that being an authority I neglect my own things, my family. But I like it. I have done three duties: representative of the women, comisario and now I’m principal. This year I’m doing double. The comisario of my section left after half a year and the council told me that I couldn’t leave my area without a comisario. To solve this problem I had to fulfill this duty as well.” (Máxima Colque)*

As we have seen, the members of the ayllu show great pride in belonging to an ayllu. The people of the ex-hacienda areas show pride in living in the rural area and being campesinos:

*“As I see it, the people in the city live more comfortable compared with us, but I wouldn’t like to be a city person because living in the rural area we can always sow something, if there is a surplus we can sell it and if not, at least we have something to eat. In the city, on the other hand, everything has to do with money. The people from the city say that the peasants don’t know much, they don’t respect us. But this doesn’t worry me, I am proud of being a peasant and I don’t think that we should feel any shame.” (Alejandro Flores)*

## **Participación Popular Seen From “Below”**

Since the rural areas have been marginalised for years by government and administrative authorities, the people living in the rural areas have themselves spent money and labor-power every time things needed to be done:

*“The comunidad asked to have a project of electrification but until now the municipality has not met its obligations. For us nothing has changed with Participación Popular, we have always ourselves dealt with things. Our fathers and grandfathers gave contributions and participated in faenas. We still do the same if we want something done in the comunidad.”*

*(Jacinto Ramos)*

Others see some advantages in the reform. Prior to Participación Popular the funds of the state seldom reached the level of the comunidades. The only support people in the rural areas could expect, was some project of a NGO or an international development agency.

*“The Participación Popular is good. Before this law there were no help for our comunidad if we wanted something done. We had to go as far as Potosí to ask for help, but the authorities there didn’t receive us, we always had to wait for an answer and sometimes they couldn’t meet with us at all. But with this Participación Popular we can go directly to the municipality, and as far as I see it, they receive us well there.”* *(Braulio Chuca)*

Seen from the local level, the major problem is poor administration of the municipalities from local authorities (mayor, members of municipal council). A number of municipalities have spent the first money they have received from the Participación Popular on “obras” - constructions in the urban centers, i.e. rebuilding the mayors office, construction or restoration of plazas or parks etc. This is slowly changing, but seen from the rural areas of the municipalities, things could change a little faster:

*“If those who administer this law on popular participation did it with responsibility it would be better. It is a good law, we have received something with these funds, it’s better than nothing...”*

*The law can work and have a future if these funds could arrive directly to the campesino because in our comunidad we have many needs. For example the water, the irrigation systems and the canals need contributions. If the law changes when the government changes, it would mean a lot of damage for us.* *(Alejandro Flores)*

As noted above, the political “system” in Bolivia has been very paternalistic. The law Participación Popular is designed to change this political culture. But as seen, the campesinos do not have faith in the government authorities’ will to



change things. Often they say that they are nothing more than tools or “steps” in the ladder of the careers of the politicians:

*“I think that this and the other laws<sup>15</sup> do not help much in the rural areas. We are just “steps” to make the politicians progress. Here we go on doing things as we always have done with our own hands, we have received very little from the government.” (Simon Lopez)*

Even though this rather pessimistic opinion is often voiced, others believe, that in time the law will change things for the better:

*“I don’t know what will happen in the future with the law on popular participation. The radio says this and that, but in the end I think that this law will help some. We the campesinos need a better life, that our land gets better and we need to be able to look after our families in a good way. I think that the law expresses this too, and the authorities (mayor, government) should fulfill this and not cheat the comunidades.” (Juan Llanos)*

### **Indigenous Authority vs. State Policy.**

The indigenous people of Bolivia, who live in the rural areas have not been used to obtaining any advantages from state policies. During history, the rural areas have witnessed several land reform, which all have reduced the areas available to the indigenous population. Also the people of the rural areas have been used to a position of opposition and protest against the central government (Jeppesen 2001).

As a result of the marginalization by the central government, and the lack of municipal administration until the approval of the reform of popular participation, the social and economic organization of the rural indigenous villages have revolved around indigenous forms of organization, either in the form of the ayllu, or in the transformed form of village councils with traits of ayllu organization in the villages of the former hacienda areas. In the course of time different central powers: the Spaniards, the oligarchy and the governments introduced laws, which altered first and foremost rights to land. But the social organization was left unaltered by central governments, since the indigenous rural population was regarded as of no interest to central governments, whose income was secured by export of natural resources (silver under the Spaniards, agricultural products, tin and other minerals in the independent republic and tin and other minerals under the governments after the revolution). The fall of the tin prices in 1985 changed this, and the Bolivian State looked for a way to secure new income. Seen in this light, the reform of popular participation can be seen as one tool of incorporating the indigenous rural population in the state and making them willing to pay taxes, which they have not done until now. Critiques

have been voiced in Bolivia, though, that this political incorporation does not open specific economic opportunities for the rural indigenous population (Jeppesen 2001). Until economic opportunities are introduced, the popular participation might end as just another measure from the centralised state authorities, which has no implication for the local rural population other than a continuation of their difficulties. The support for the participation will therefore maybe be of limited size, since the exclusion of the rural population regarding economic possibilities has not changed. The indigenous authorities will then still be the most important power at village level, and the new institutions like the OTB's will have limited importance. On the other hand people might find use in representing their villages in the municipal governments, if they can find ways to be elected outside the realm of the political parties. What is needed is to open a space outside traditional power structures, represented by the political parties, and find new ways to evolve into the (new) power structures.

## **Conclusion**

The law on popular participation is designed as a tool for change in the Bolivian society. It is a measure of acknowledging the difficult situation of the rural indigenous population in the Andes as well as the plains and forests of Eastern Bolivia. It is also a part of the democratization process, which is taking place in most Latin American countries today.

Transforming the Bolivian State from a party-ruled monolith representing only a small segment of Bolivian society into a democratic state in line with the “good governance” philosophy of the donor organizations as well as representing the actual Bolivian population, which consists of a large percentage of indigenous people is not an easy task. One can discuss whether the democratization in the western definition of the notion is possible in a country like Bolivia (Andersson 1998). But the reform could be seen as a first step for the indigenous population in gaining citizenship and thereby exerting influence on (local) politics with possibilities of achieving goals that would improve every-day life for the rural indigenous population. In this manner, the concerns of the rural population have a chance of being acknowledged through municipal democracy and decisions, which ideally originate from ”below” in a democratic process.

As it is designed, the law will not attempt to incorporate the rural indigenous population by altering their status in Bolivian society as was the case in the attempt from 1952 and onwards in changing the rural population into “campesinos”, seen as a homogenous entity and not taking into consideration the different modes of organization in the rural areas.<sup>16</sup>

Today's emphasis on the diversity of the Bolivian society as expressed in the constitution<sup>17</sup> can open "spaces" (political and physical) for the rural indigenous population of Bolivia.

This working paper has given voice to some of the people for whom the Participación Popular was intended. As we can see, the people of the highland rural areas of Bolivia – whether living in ayllus or in ex-hacienda areas – do not expect a lot from the central government. Elsewhere I have discussed the "clash" between the local elite and political parties with the indigenous peoples' organizations<sup>18</sup>, which in many respects seem to represent two elements, which will be difficult to unite. But if corruption and discrimination can be reduced, the municipal governments might overcome old practices of ruling, and create new spaces where different groups of Bolivian society can meet. Some do see advantages, as we have seen in the quotations. The question is, however, whether the indigenous population and their organizations are considered as equal partners by the government. One could suspect, that Bolivia's dependency on foreign aid has made the opinion of the donors count most in this question. Among donors' democratization, human and indigenous rights are high on the agenda.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In the colonial period the criollos were those persons born in the colony by Spanish parents. They did not possess the same rights as Spaniards born in Spain. For example criollos couldn't occupy official posts, this was reserved for Spaniards born in Spain. Later the term 'criollo' means descendant of the Spaniards.

<sup>2</sup> The state owns major industries and mines. Also the state is centralistic and forming a huge apparatus of bureaucracy.

<sup>3</sup> The leaders of the ayllus have different names in the different parts of Bolivia. But the structure of leadership is more or less the same.

<sup>4</sup> This was called 'reducciones' and was introduced by the Viceking Toledo in the 1570's.

<sup>5</sup> In the Spanish era, the corregidores were 'mayors' of smaller administrative areas (canton), referring to the closest Spanish administrator. The corregidor was mostly from 'outside' the rural area, often an urban mestizo with some education. After the revolution of 1952, the corregidor is a political nominated authority, taken from within the comunidades. Although, the cargo is often political, it is still regarded as a cargo, which all male members of the comunidad should hold for a year.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, there is some dispute as to who were the tax collectors after 1952. In some comunidades it was the kuraka and in others the corregidor. The rural tax was abandoned in the mid-1980s.

<sup>7</sup> On "nation-building processes see Gellner, 1983 and Anderson 1991.

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<sup>8</sup> One of the expressed goals of the MNR in the revolutionary periods was to create a more equal Bolivian society. This was partly due to the fact, that MNR needed the peasant militias to fight the oligarchy. To motivate the peasants, a program for a “new” Bolivia was created. Once in power, the MNR abandoned many of its former goals.

<sup>9</sup> Except in the agro-industrial areas of the Santa Cruz department.

<sup>10</sup> After the independence, the kurakas again were elected among the inhabitants of the community, and the cargo transformed to be annual.

<sup>11</sup> This is for example the situation in the community of El Puente in the Coma municipality, where I did my fieldwork.

<sup>12</sup> In the southern part of the municipality there is another ayllu named Mankasaya. Historically the two were part of one ayllu (different ecological zones), but the division of the area in between into hacienda lands, has separated the two.

<sup>13</sup> In the rural areas the evangelical church has spread to many villages, and in some up to 50% of the people now belong to the evangelical church. Among other things this means that they do not drink alcohol when doing common work or celebrating.

<sup>14</sup> Town nearby which has a market every weekend.

<sup>15</sup> I.e. INRA (agricultural reform) and the education reform.

<sup>16</sup> The organizing practices are different in different parts of Bolivia. In the Andean area, the ayllus and ex-hacienda areas predominates. In Eastern Bolivia small groups of hunters and gathers live in the forests along with peasants and big farms, and in the plains other ways of organising production exists, i.e. large cattle farms in the Chaco.

<sup>17</sup> In 1994 the constitution was altered, and it was stressed that Bolivia is a multiethnic and pluricultural state.

<sup>18</sup> Andersson, 1999 & 2000.

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